

TELEVISION & RADIO

TELEVISION

HOWARD ROSENBERG

In media, Goliath edging out David

I watch KTLA's 10 p.m. news when I can.

Not because it's a good newscast. It isn't, unless you think gorging on crime polishes your intellect. And not because I look forward to Hal Fishman's stuffed-shirt commentaries or Mindy Burbano's giddy entertainment dish. I don't, unless dying for a laugh.

No, I watch KTLA to find out what my favorite paper, the Los Angeles Times, is writing about the next day. Listen:

"The Times reports..."

"A congressional official told The Times..."

"That's the very latest from the news desk here at the Los Angeles Times."

From his lips to your ears.

On the screen is Ron Olsen, a KTLA veteran who is that rare specialist on a news staff of pop-in, pop-out generalists. His specialty — the culmination of his seasoning and expertise after many years in the business — is the front page of The Times. From his permanent, camera-ready position inside the paper's newsroom, he covers our coverage. It's a dirty job...

There's a positive effect. By capsulizing some of our lead stories for KTLA viewers, Olsen does supply snippets — albeit without context — that his station could not acquire on its own. It hasn't the talent or the inclination.

Mostly, though, he functions as an advertisement for this paper. As a Tribune stockholder, I'm thrilled. As a concerned media observer, I'm not.

Now, think about it. Like other stations in town, KTLA has no one permanently based in Sacramento, the state capital, where critical decisions about California are made and cry out for close scrutiny and smart analysis.

But it's got a guy at The Times. Because he doesn't have to hop a plane to get there? Yeah, maybe. But mostly because KTLA and The Times are both owned by my favorite media corporation, the beloved Tribune Co.

Just as Los Angeles stations KTTV and KCOP are owned by News Corp., and Viacom Inc. now owns KCBS and KCAL, former competitors that not only share news staffs and news stories, but advertise each other in

their newscasts. As in KCBS anchor Harold Greene crowing on KCAL about his own newscast: "Those stories and more just minutes away on CBS2 news."

Isn't deregulation great? And don't we need more of it?

I mention this now because we may be at a critical crossroads on this issue. Led by its chairman, Michael K. Powell, the Federal Communications Commission is expected to vote June 2 to loosen rules governing media cross-ownership.

Bad idea. *Terrible* idea.

Tribune and bigger media companies are cheering, but many watchdog and consumer groups are opposed, arguing correctly that most of the proposed revisions would ultimately harm the public by limiting public discourse.

The vote is expected to be 3 to 2 in favor of a rollback, on grounds that these regulations, imposed in an earlier, quaint communications era, ignore the wider spectrum of choices now available through cable and the Internet. Yet this is largely a phantom rainbow, for these new technologies have increasingly come under the control of the same media giants who would benefit most from loosened regulations.

All right, you're yawning. It's dry stuff. You're as underwhelmed as when Fishman's commentaries remind you of Beethoven's Fifth played on a xylophone.

But this must be stopped.

Expected to fail is a rule barring a single company from owning TV stations that reach more than 35% of U.S. households. That would rise to 45%, meaning that giant networks would be able to scoop up more stations, and in doing so potentially limit local control of programming. That centralized iron fist should worry you whether you're liberal or conservative or someone in between.

Immediately benefiting would be Viacom (owner of CBS, MTV and UPN) and News Corp. (owner of Fox and its minions). Although mergers have left them above the 35% limit, they have waivers while the FCC reconsiders that cap.

Another reported proposal would allow cross-ownership involving newspapers and broadcast stations (as in Tribune

owning The Times and KTLA because it, too, has an FCC waiver, as does News Corp. to own the New York Post) in all but the smallest of markets.

In addition, another reported proposal would allow a company to own more than one station in a market, as Viacom and News Corp. do here, and up to three in the nation's largest markets. That means, presumably, that Tribune would be able to own not only The Times and KTLA but two additional TV stations in Los Angeles, raising the prospect of Olsen, our man in the newsroom, speaking to L.A. from a trio of stations instead of just one.

If these proposals come through, as anticipated, a door will swing open to allow more unhealthy consolidation, and the L.A. duopolies cited above would be in stone, as would be an NBC triopoly under a waiver it has here to own KNBC and Spanish-language Telemundo and KWHY.

Meaning more media control in fewer hands. Meaning more cross-promotion. Meaning less diversity. Meaning fewer independent voices in news and entertainment. Meaning less competition and fewer options for information.

It's true that what we have now is often unreliable, a fact underlined by tag-along TV's generally feckless, ever-manipulated, go-with-the-flow, yassah-Mr. President coverage of the war in Iraq and its aftermath. Everyone would profit if the quality of today's journalism were higher.

Diverse media, however imperfect, are essential to us all, however.

If Powell and his allies hold sway on these proposed revisions, America will find itself walking a perilous high wire from which its democracy may someday topple. This is not hysteria, it's what may happen.

Can we in the media be counted on to act responsibly with so many masters to serve?

Another daily I subscribe to is the Ventura County Star, a paper with many good qualities. Curiously, though, it runs news stories and columns about cable's Home & Garden Television, in addition to giving special prominence to HGTV and Food Network programs in its TV highlights on a daily basis. If you're wondering why, one possibility is that HGTV and the Food Network are distributed by E.W. Scripps Co., the same company that publishes the Ventura County Star.

Meanwhile, be sure and catch the best of the Los Angeles Times on KTLA.

Howard Rosenberg's column appears Mondays and Fridays. He can be contacted at howard.rosenberg@latimes.com.

Tart antidote to TV news

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World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, Newt Gingrich, Jeb Bush, the Rev. Pat Robertson, Bill Clinton, NAFTA and Wal-Mart among many, many other targets.

He dissects California's bogus "energy crisis" of two years ago, probes the political backdrop to the Enron scandal — "Enron was the Rosemary's baby of the frightening coupling of deregulation and campaign cash," he writes — lays out the troubling details of the so-called cash for access scandal that rocked British Prime Minister Tony Blair's administration, and lambastes globalization apostles who preach the overnight conversion of Third World economies without regard for the short-term social costs.

Peter Osnos, publisher and chief executive of PublicAffairs, a New York publishing company, believes that "The Best Democracy Money Can Buy," which was originally printed in hardcover in Britain, belongs to a relatively recent wave of in-your-face books about politics that appeals primarily to a liberal-progressive readership, including Michael Moore's "Stupid White Men" and Al Franken's "Rush Limbaugh Is a Big Fat Idiot and Other Observations."

"What's interesting to me is that the left has generally felt that they had ceded that sort of populism to the right-wing talk radio people and a certain kind of anti-liberal, anti-Clinton screed," Osnos says. "This shows there are life signs on the populist left just as there are aggressive life signs on the populist right, and I think that's a good thing myself because the more vigorous the debate, the better."

Since its Feb. 25 paperback publication in the United States, "The Best Democracy Money Can Buy" has sold more than 100,000 copies, with total worldwide sales of around 200,000. Last week, it was No. 2 on the New York Times' paperback bestseller list and No. 3 on the San Francisco Chronicle's. In March, it rose to No. 4 on the Los Angeles Times' paperback list. This, despite the fact that it has yet to receive a book review in a major U.S. newspaper. Instead, sales have grown through word of mouth, and the book has received a boost by being offered as a donor premium in a number of independent-radio fund-raising drives, says Palast's organizer, Ina Howard.

Palast's ability to make sense of stacks of dense financial data earned him a reputation for doggedness (he holds an MBA from the University of Chicago). His caustic, analytical prose earned him a byline. These days, he makes his living as an investigative reporter for the BBC, prestige London newspapers like the Guardian and the Observer and a handful of left-progressive U.S. magazines such as Harper's and the Nation. Able to dish out, as well as receive, tough opinions — you should see his e-mail sometime — he appears to thrive on



LAWRENCE K. HO/Los Angeles Times

PHILOSOPHY: Greg Palast follows "the information line."

Britain's rough-and-tumble journalistic culture. "I simply cannot write in that solemn, straightforward style," he says.

In his new book's most publicized chapter, "Jim Crow in Cyberspace," Palast reconstructs a story that he first broke a few weeks after the 2000 presidential election. After sifting through reams of voter rolls and other documents, he asserted that Gov. Jeb Bush of Florida and his secretary of state, Katherine Harris, had ordered local election supervisors to purge tens of thousands of mostly black, Latino and poor white voters from state voting registries, ostensibly because they were felons.

Palast wrote that state officials knew, or should have known, that those lists were highly inaccurate — among those incorrectly named as a felon was a county election supervisor. The resulting disenfranchisement of thousands of Florida voters, he maintains, may have cost Al Gore the election. Harris later responded that Palast's reporting "distorts and misrepresents the events" in question "to support his twisted and maniacally partisan conclusions."

The story first aired on the BBC and ran in the Guardian, then was picked up by Salon, the Internet journal. A condensed version also appeared months later in the Washington Post and Harper's. But apart from a few U.S. newspaper columnists who praised it, Palast's reporting barely caused a ripple west of the British Isles. Palast thinks he knows why. "There's basically one viewpoint in America today," he says, "pro-market, pro-free trade, limited government and definitely pro-globalization."

Yet Palast, 50, says he's "not following the left line. I'm following the information line." He points out that his book has many unflattering things to say about the Clintons and Gore. His

journalistic style, he says, is to let 'er rip, regardless of whose sacred cow gets flayed. He'll admit to one animus, though: "I'm driven by a lot of resentment, I'll say that straight up. My daddy wasn't Bush or Bin Laden or Kennedy."

Not being a fortunate son, Palast earned scholarships to attend college, passing through San Fernando Valley State College (now Cal State Northridge) and UCLA en route to the University of Chicago. There he did postgraduate work with Milton Friedman, whose supply-side economic theories inspired the rise of Thatcherism and Reaganomics. "What's the point in talking with some lefty Marxist egghead with a beard who doesn't have any information?" Palast asks, explaining why he chose to study with a conservative oracle like Friedman.

But while he was boning up on neo-laissez-faire doctrine, Palast also was working "undercover" for the United Electrical Workers Union and the steelworkers, examining corporate account books and arcane financial codes. He investigated cost overruns at the Shoreham nuclear power plant on Long Island and the rupture of the Exxon Valdez oil tanker in 1989, on behalf of the indigenous Chugach people who lived along Prince William Sound. He also took a job with Union Associates, a New York company monitoring white-collar fraud, and began writing op-ed pieces and feeding story ideas to reporters. When he concluded that many of the reporters were either too faint-hearted or inept to follow up, he decided to become a full-time journalist himself.

Palast believes the U.S. media have largely given up asking tough questions and making officials squirm in favor of rewriting government press releases and swallowing press-conference pabulum — with disastrous consequences for democracy at home and social justice abroad. When the British media beckoned to him a few years ago, he made the jump to London, uprooting Linda, his wife of 26 years, and the couple's now 6-year-old twins. The family recently returned to New York, in part, Palast says, because his kids were starting to get "those 'Upstairs, Downstairs' accents."

How Palast's own re-acclimation to America will go is another question. Currently, he's working with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King III to petition the federal government to implement voting reforms, in line with the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights' scathing critique of Florida's 2000 presidential election balloting. He's also putting together a film about the Bush family for the BBC.

"BBC doesn't care if I have teeth or hair," he says, laughing. "My hope is to get back into America, but I can't imagine doing this stuff. I certainly can't imagine wearing a cat pelt on my head."

